

Name: Deanna Palazzola

Title: Paraprofessional

Organization or Agency: AFSCME Local 1996

Topic: HB 6881 - An Act Concerning Various Revisions to The Education Statutes Related to Educator Compensation and Paraeducators

Senator McCrory, Representative Currey, ranking members and members of the education committee: Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of House Bill 6881, concerning paraprofessional compensation, training and working conditions.

I'm a paraprofessional at West Vine Street School in Stonington Connecticut and I'm also a member of AFSCME Local 1996, the Stonington paraprofessionals' union.

I am a 1 on 1 paraprofessional, which means that I work directly with individual students who require additional and curated attention. As a 1 on 1 para, I am a key part of my students' education and spend more time with these students than anyone else at my school, including their teachers. Despite this, I am not included in planning and placement meetings for my students. My exclusion in this process is ultimately harmful to the students that I work with as my role uniquely enables me to get to know their specific needs better than anyone else. The ability for paras to participate in these meetings moving forward would be incredibly beneficial for the students that we serve and should be a priority if we want to provide the best education possible for our students.

I work very hard as a paraprofessional and take great pride in my work. I do this work because I love the job and the students that I work with. If I didn't love the work, I would have stopped working as a paraprofessional years ago as the pay of just \$16.77 an hour is much too low for how challenging and important our work is. For instance, at under \$17 an hour, I am unable to save adequately for retirement and it feels like I will have to work until I'm 100 because of it. Additionally, my school has failed to retain and hire paras in the past, in part due to the low pay. This has led to a shortage of paraprofessionals in my school that requires all of us to take on extra work that reduces the quality of education our students receive. I believe that a pay increase, improved healthcare, and a defined pension plan would go a long way towards hiring and retaining additional paras.

I have dedicated my life to educating students and I wouldn't trade it for anything. Passing this bill would be a very important step in properly compensating paraeducators for their labor and, just as importantly, improve the quality of education that our students are receiving. I urge you to pass this bill.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this important matter.

Deanna Palazzola